Hitler’s Reign 1933-1945

Adolf Hitler held Germany under sway with his charismatic speeches, attractive promises and decisive, forceful personality, all of which won him power when Germany was still reeling under the effects of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles, the new unstable coalition government and the economic depression swamping the world. Such dire circumstances called for dire measures, which Hitler was all too ready to put into place. After coming to power, he quickly got rid of all opposition, spreading terror and paranoia with his paramilitary troops (the Sturmabteilung, or the SA), and established a single-party state: the Third Reich. Legal rights of citizens were suspended, and the removal of opposition became an official party policy, that of gleichschaltung (“bringing into line”). Hitler and his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, ensured public support by creating the Fuhrer Myth, which portrayed Hitler as a messiah, a saviour of the German people, come to deliver them from their hardships, which included the threat posed by Communists, Judeo-Bolsheviks and other undesirable minorities. This deliverance was to be carried out by the aims of Hitler’s foreign policy, which focused on revoking the Treaty of Versailles and undoing the wrong done to Germany by it, creating a Grossdeutschland through Pan-Germanic imperialism, and finally, creating Lebensraum, or living space, for Germany by annexing territory in the East.

The Nazi consolidation of power was based partially on the usage of Anti-Semitism as a tool, with the Jewish people serving as scapegoats. Hitler proclaimed that the Jews were the roots of Germany’s socioeconomic problems. This notion was not hard to introduce to the Germans, who for centuries had held religious prejudice against Jews in their minds. The idea was reinforced by Hitler’s ideas of Aryan supremacy and the purity of Aryan blood. Hitler used propaganda to plant seeds of racism in the German people, claiming that Jews were untrustworthy and unintelligent by virtue of their race and their blood. These ideas were ideal for gaining political influence, something Hitler was well-aware of:

**I know perfectly well that in the scientific sense there is no such thing as race. As a politician I need an idea which enables the order which has hitherto existed on a historic basis to be abolished and an entirely new order enforced and given an intellectual basis. And for this purpose the idea of race serves me well. [Quoted in John Toland, *Adolf Hitler*][[1]](#footnote-1)**

On becoming Chancellor, Hitler became more and more outspoken against Jews. He claimed that Aryan superiority was being threatened by intermarriage with Jews, who he believed were lazy and contributed little to the world. He believed (or at least propagated) that Jews were responsible for Germany losing the First World War, that they were slowly taking over the country (despite the fact that they made up only 1% of the population), and that Jews were involved in a joint conspiracy with Communists to take over the world. This last message was particularly frightening to the German people, who feared communism above all else. In effect, Hitler turned people’s attention away from their problems and focused it on Jews, giving them someone (other than the government) to blame for their hardships.

**"Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end satanically glaring at and spying on the unconscious girl whom he plans to seduce, adulterating her blood with the ultimate idea of bastardizing the white race which they hate and thus lowering its cultural and political level so that the Jew might dominate."[[2]](#footnote-2)**

On the first of April, 1933, Hitler organised a one day boycott of all Jewish shops, with his paramilitary troops (the SA) raiding some of the shops. This was only the first of the steps taken to make life so unpleasant for the Jews that they would be forced to emigrate from Germany. Many shops and restaurants refused to serve Jews. Signs were put up banning Jews from public parks, swimming pools and public transport. Germans were encouraged not to use Jewish doctors and lawyers, and Jewish civil servants, teachers and employees of the mass media were all sacked. The SA put pressure on people not to buy goods produced by Jewish companies, so much so that several prominent Jewish companies, like the Ullstein Press (largest publisher in Germany), were forced to sell their companies to the government.

Hitler’s policy towards Jews was solidified in the form of the Nuremburg Laws of 1935-1936, which declared that Jews were no longer citizens of the German state. Jews could no longer marry German citizens. They could no longer vote in general elections. They had to carry identification cards, and their passports had to be marked with the dreaded J for Juden, or Jew. By 1938, it was almost impossible for Jewish professionals to remain professionals, as more and more occupations became banned for them. Jews who chose to leave Germany were forced to leave all their possessions behind, which were of course claimed by the government following their departure. However, not all Jews were rich enough to leave Germany, having been affected by the Great Depression themselves. Hitler asked Reinhard Heydrich to arrange the deportation of Jews to Poland. 15,000 Jews were literally pushed and shoved over the Polish border, where Polish troops, not knowing what was happening, opened fire on them. The son of one of these Polish Jews living in Paris was so distraught by what was happening that he decided to shoot the ambassador. The ambassador, however, wasn’t present, so he shot a minor German official instead. Goebbels made quick work of using this to further Anti-Semitic propaganda.

The Anti-Semitic sentiment in Nazi Germany came to a head on November 9, 1938, the day the minor German official was shot in Paris, declared by Goebbels to be a day of demonstration against the remaining Jews in Germany. Called Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass), two days of rioting ensued, in which the Nazi Police was told not to interfere, but to participate in the burnings of the synagogues, the destruction of Jewish property, the beatings, shootings and arrests of Jewish people, all of which resulted in the destruction of thousands of businesses and homes, and the detention of 20, 000 Jews. The cost of the shattered windows alone came to six million marks. The Jews were ordered to pay for the damages. New laws soon followed forbidding Jews to own businesses or attend plays, movies, concerts, or exhibitions. Jewish children were expelled from public schools and special curfews were established for Jews. Jews had to ride in the backs of buses or trains. Jews were not allowed out on the streets during Nazi holidays. Jews were forced to sell property, to hand over stocks, bonds, and jewellery to the government. This all sums up what can be called Hitler’s minority policy.

**“I could not believe my eyes when I saw the Berlin synagogue burning. The fire brigade was there, but did not lift a finger. They were instructed to be on the spot only for the protection of the nearby Aryan houses. Jews were rushing into the burning building and saving the Holy Scrolls while the hilarious crowd all around jeered at them.”[[3]](#footnote-3)**

Some of the first steps Hitler took on coming to power were to repair the damage the Treaty of Versailles had caused, and to do this, he had to bring Germany out of its dangerous diplomatic isolation. His political play in the 1930s was to pretend to cooperate with the international community, especially France and Britain, reveal the hypocrisy of the League of Nations and its principles which benefitted the victors of WWI, and then retreat from the international scene in protest. His play was only aided and abetted by the animosity between France and Britain, with Britain pushing for revision of the Versailles Treaty and France desperately holding on to the idea of keeping Germany crippled in order to secure her borders. In the disarmament conference of Geneva, France’s reluctance to disarm ended up supporting Hitler’s ploy, as it gave Hitler the opportunity to withdraw from the conference and continue with Germany’s secret rearmament. He also pulled Germany out of the League of Nations. By 1935, Hitler openly declared his intentions of building up Germany’s air force (the Luftwaffe) and navy (kriegsmarine), and the reintroduction of military conscription.

**“Everybody thought that there was some justification in Hitler’s demands. All Germans hated Versailles. Hitler tore up this hateful treaty and forced France to its knees…. people said, “he’s got courage to take risks”[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Following Germany’s withdrawal from the League of Nations, Hitler felt the need to weaken France’s alliances in the East by making a tactical alliance with Poland, a country which he was already planning on annexing. His non-aggression pact created an impression of peaceful intentions, while at the same time the government was doubling its spending on its rearmament program. The creation of the Stresa Front by Britain, France and Italy was supposed to serve as a deterrent to Hitler, but Britain and France’s reluctance to act against Italy upon its invasion of Abyssinia only showed Hitler the weakness of the greatest threats to his plans. The Stresa Front fell apart, and in a move to curb German rearmament, Britain concluded a naval agreement with Germany that limited the kriegsmarine to 35% the size of the Royal Navy. Like all agreements concluded during this time period, this too was made only to be broken later on at Hitler’s convenience.

In continuation of Hitler’s revocation of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler used Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia as an opportunity to remilitarise the Rhineland while France and Britain were otherwise occupied. This was in direct defiance of the terms of the treaty which dictated the complete demilitarisation of the Rhineland. Hitler supported Mussolini’s invasion, which in turn led to the Italian acceptance of German influence in Austria and the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. On 7 March, 1936, Hitler sent a small number of troops to the Rhineland. Britain was again reluctant to act, and although France was struck again with fear and suspicion, she was powerless without Britain’s support. Hitler presumed (rightly) that future aggression would be met with non-action from these two powers and went on to conclude an alliance with Mussolini as the two fascist countries of Europe, which came to be known as the Rome-Berlin axis. Both Hitler and Mussolini worked in cooperation with regards to their foreign policy, and agreed to send help to General Franco of Spain who was at that time conducting an uprising against the Spanish democratic government.

In the same year, Hitler began to work on improving relations with the Japanese, a process which began with the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact, a pact against Communism. Although Britain, China, Poland and Italy were also invited to sign the pact, only Italy signed it. Relations between Japan and Germany were stressed, however, because of the on-going Sino-Japanese war and Germany’s informal alliance with China. Hitler was asked to renounce this alliance during diplomatic correspondence with the Japanese emperor’s brother, however, the German military was strongly against this move as it would deprive Germany of the raw materials needed for its rearmament program and cause harm to Germany’s newly recovered economic stability. By 1938, however, Hitler was convinced that a German-Japanese alliance would be more beneficial than detrimental, as Japan was growing more and more influential. Hitler recognized the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the puppet state of Manchukuo, cancelled arms shipments to the Chinese and withdrew the German officers serving in the Chinese army. This led to the termination of the Sino-German economic agreements, which consequently had adverse implications for the German economy. The need for Lebensraum became more pressing than ever, now for economic reasons as well.

In 1938, Hitler decided it was time to act upon his intentions of uniting the Germans of Europe (Volkedeutsche) under one big empire. His first target was Austria, his birthplace, union with whom was forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. German influence in Austria had been growing all this time by the introduction of Nazism amongst the Austro-Germans living along the German border. The Austrian chancellor was threatened by Hitler’s paramilitary and was forced to promote Austrian Nazis to prominent positions in the Austrian government. A new Prime Minister who was under the influence of Hitler came to power at this time, and it was he who allowed the Anschluss to take place, namely the German annexation of Austria. Hitler was allowed to carry out this move by Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, and by British sentiment that the forbidden union of Germany and Austria had been against the principle of self-determination in the first place.

**"The hard fact is that nothing could have arrested what has actually happened [in Austria] unless this country and other countries had been prepared to use force." Neville Chamberlain[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Following Germany’s successful annexation of Austria, Hitler turned his attention to the Sudetenland, an area with a large German minority that had been awarded to the new state of Czechoslovakia founded after WWI. Hitler was more than ready to wage all-out war against Czechoslovakia in order to annex the whole of the state, but he was restrained by his need to maintain a good impression in the eyes of the international community. He claimed instead that the Germans living in the Sudetenland were being ill-treated, and encouraged the Sudeten Germans to demonstrate for greater autonomy. As the crisis worsened, Chamberlain was obliged to step in and carry out diplomatic talks with Hitler, but Hitler was eager for war and refused to come to a compromise. Instead, a diplomatic conference held in Munich was proposed by Mussolini, in which the leaders of Britain, France and Italy (the Czechoslovakians were not invited and thus had no say in the matter) met with Hitler’s demands. The loss of the Sudetenland left Czechoslovakia defenceless, and by March 1939, Hitler had occupied the rest of the Czechoslovakian territory, threatening the president with bombing if he put up a struggle. The occupation was partly due to economic crises in the Third Reich. This was the first non-German territory to be annexed, marking the beginning of Hitler’s imperialistic expansion. Within the same month, Memel was seized from Lithuania as well. The policy of appeasement had failed.

**Hitler declared that it was his "unalterable" decision to "smash Czechoslovakia" by 1 October of the same year, which was explained as securing the eastern flank "for advancing against the West, England and France".[[6]](#footnote-6)**

Britain finally took defensive steps in the wake of the revelation of Hitler’s true intentions by striking up a guarantee with Poland, which was strategically likely to be Hitler’s next target, given that Hitler was already pushing for the return of Danzig and the Polish Corridor, which had been part of Germany before being granted to Poland under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Poland would grant Hitler the Lebensraum he longed for Germany to have, as well as granting him dominance in Eastern Europe. Poland would also serve as an economic resource in the case of a British blockade. Poland became Hitler’s major foreign policy goal of 1939. Hitler’s original plan was to make Poland a satellite state of Germany, but his demands were denied by the Polish government. Although the German army harboured anti-Polish sentiments, the prospect of a war against France and Britain was less than appetizing. Hitler thus resorted to applying diplomatic pressure by renouncing his non-aggression pact with Poland as well as the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. He also used the city of Danzig and the Polish Corridor as pretexts for aggression against Poland. In order to further prevent the German-Poland issue from escalating into general war, Hitler decided to conclude an agreement with the Soviet Union, the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which would prevent Russian intervention, and hopefully also deter France and Britain from interfering in Germany’s occupation of Poland.

September 1, 1939 marked the German invasion of Western Poland and what was to be the start of the Second World War, as France and Britain declared war on Germany on the 3rd of September. Russia attacked Poland on her eastern frontier. France and Britain were slow to act, and the conquest of Poland was followed by invasion of Denmark, Norway and France herself. Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium were also conquered in the process, and 1940 marked both the entry of Italy in the war on Germany’s side and France’s surrender to Germany. Britain was now being bombed by the German Luftwaffe, having rejected Hitler’s offers of peace. Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria joined Germany to form what came to be known as the Axis Powers. It was thus that Hitler’s aggressive nationalism and imperialistic aims transformed Europe into a battlefield for another world war just twenty years after the devastating destruction of the First World War.

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